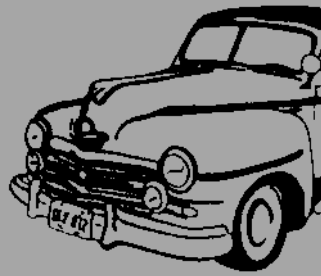


About Christopher Paul Curtis



"The Watsons will always be special to me because it broke me out of the warehouse I was working in. I'm doing something that I want to do, finally."

—Christopher Paul Curtis

When Christopher Paul Curtis received a Newbery Honor for his first book, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, he achieved something that many authors spend their whole lives working toward. How does an author accomplish so much with his first book? Hard work? Determination? Talent? In Curtis's case, it was a combination of all three.

Christopher Paul Curtis was born on May 10, 1953, in Flint, Michigan. He is the second of five children born to Herman E. Curtis, a doctor, and Leslie Curtis, a homemaker. Both of his parents loved to read, and so did Christopher, but he had trouble finding books about African-American kids like himself.

In school, one of Curtis's favorite teachers was Ms. Suzanne Henry-Jakeway, his third-grade teacher. He has said that his favorite class was history and his favorite book was *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee.

When Dr. Curtis's patients weren't able to pay him enough to support his family, he went to work at Fisher Body Flint Plant No. 1, where he worked on an assembly line, putting together cars. After Christopher graduated from high school in 1971, he began working with his father at the Fisher Body plant. It was supposed to be only a summer job to make some money before he started college in the fall, but the money was too good to pass up. Curtis worked full-time on the assembly line for thirteen years, hanging eighty-pound doors on Buick cars. At night, he attended classes part-time at the Flint campus of the University of Michigan, working toward a degree in political science. While he was a student there, Curtis received the Avery Hopwood and Jules Hopwood Prize for major essays for an early draft of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. Curtis loved the idea of being a writer, but with a full-time job and school at night, how could he ever find time to write?

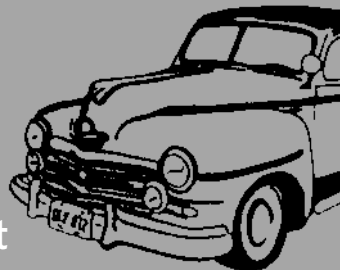
At Fisher Body, the guys on the line alternated hanging the car doors: One man would hang a door, then his partner would hang a door, and they would repeat the process again and again, hanging a total of sixty doors every hour and never getting a very long break. But Curtis and his partner came up with a plan: If one of them hung *every* door for a half hour straight, rather than alternating, the other man could rest or do whatever he liked for a half hour every hour. For Curtis, this meant a half hour of writing for every half hour of hanging doors! Once he and his partner started using this system, Curtis found that the regular writing schedule helped him become more confident in himself as a writer. He also found that the time he spent writing at work took him to another place in his mind, away from his tedious job.

He has said that he believes the hard work of an assembly line gave him the discipline to be an author.

After leaving the factory, Curtis held several jobs while he continued to take classes. He worked as a campaign worker, a maintenance man, a customer service representative, a warehouse clerk, and a purchasing clerk. In 1993, Curtis's wife, Kaysandra, told him that he "better hurry up and start doing something constructive with his life or else start looking for a new place to live." Kaysandra said that for one year she would support the family while he wrote his book.

With that challenge set before him, Curtis spent most of the next year at the public library, working on the manuscript that would become *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. At the end of the year, he took a chance and submitted the manuscript to a national contest for unpublished authors. An editor plucked Curtis's project out of the huge pile of manuscripts and chose it for publication. *The Watsons* went on to be named not only a Newbery Honor Book—one of the most respected awards for a children's book—but also a Coretta Scott King Honor Book, an American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults, and was the only book for young readers to make *The New York Times* list of top 100 books of the year. And how did Christopher Paul Curtis follow up the huge success of his first book? He wrote *Bud, Not Buddy*, which won the 2002 Newbery Medal—the highest honor a children's book author can receive! Curtis, who received his bachelor of science degree from the University of Michigan in 2000, continues to write and is currently at work on his third book, *Bucking the Sarge*.

How *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* Came About



"I've always felt like inside I was a writer. Whatever else I've done, I'm Christopher Curtis/Writer. It's one of those situations where if you follow your dreams, sometimes you're extremely lucky and things do come true, and I feel extremely lucky with what has happened."

—Christopher Paul Curtis

Flint, Michigan, is home to many people who are originally from the South. Christopher Paul Curtis had heard some of his friends at the factory talk about driving south when they visited their relatives. Rather than splitting up the trip and staying overnight someplace along the way, they'd drive for many hours straight—however long it took to get there.

Curtis always wondered if he would be able to do the same, so when his wife's sister moved to Florida, he decided to give it a try. His wife wanted to plan the trip every step of the way, but he was set on driving twenty-four hours straight! Soon, Christopher, his wife, Kaysandra, and their son Steven were on their way to

Florida. Little did they know that the trip would become the basis of Curtis's first book.

Curtis says, "That's how the story got started. It was about a family taking a trip and the year was 1963, but the story was called *The Watsons Go to Florida* at the time. Then I went back and worked on it, but once I got the family to Florida, nothing happened. So I set it aside for a while, until my son brought home a poem by Dudley Randall called "Ballad of Birmingham," about the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. As soon as I heard it, I said, 'Ah! The Watsons want to go to *Birmingham!*' and I wrote the rest of the story." While the story is not autobiographical, Curtis has said that he can see parts of himself in both Kenny and Byron Watson.

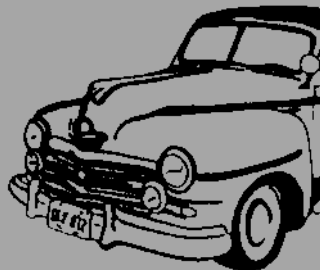
Each day, Curtis worked on the manuscript in the children's section of the local library. At night, his son Steven would help out by typing what he'd written by hand earlier in the day.

But Curtis didn't have a literary agent, so he wasn't sure how to go about getting the book published. He knew that he would have to find some way for someone at a publishing house to read his story. To accomplish that, Curtis submitted the book to Delacorte Press's Contest for a First Young Adult Novel. His editor, Wendy Lamb, recalls opening piles of submissions to the contest and seeing the title *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, "words that filled [her] with curiosity and dread; words that instantly evoked the church bombing where young girls died in Sunday school. Well, [she thought] this person was ambitious, trying to write about something terrible, something important." She

decided to take a second look later, and while the characters in the book made it too young to qualify for the contest, she loved it so much that Delacorte decided to publish it anyway.

Everyone—teachers, librarians, critics, and children—loved the book, too, and it went on to be one of the most successful books published in 1995.

An Interview with Christopher Paul Curtis



"I hope I'm writing the kind of books that I would have liked to read as a child."

—Christopher Paul Curtis

When you were in school, were you known to be a good writer?

Yes. I didn't necessarily like to write, though. And when I was in school, there wasn't a lot of emphasis put on creative writing. We would mostly write essays and term papers. My problem was getting motivated to do it. Once I got it done, I was pretty good at it.

What was your favorite class?

Probably history, but I think it always depended on the teacher. A particular teacher can make something very interesting.

*You have said that *To Kill a Mockingbird* was your favorite book as a child. Do you still read books that are intended for young readers?*

Yes, I read a lot of books for kids now that I've found out I'm an author for kids. I want to know what everybody else is doing.

Are there any recent books for young readers that have impressed you?

Yes. *Hush* by Jacqueline Woodson.

I have read that one of your favorite authors is Toni Morrison. Can you explain what you like most about her writing?

It's her use of language; the beauty of her words keeps you coming back.

What do you like most about writing for children?

It takes me back to my childhood, which was a very happy time for me. It brings back a lot of memories. I find it very relaxing. When I work, I just sit there and smile.

Do you take time off between writing books?

After I finished *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, I started *Bud, Not Buddy* right away. I was back to working in a warehouse, and I didn't want to do that. I figured I would have to publish ten books before I could quit my job so I thought, "Let me get right on this." With the book I'm working on now, *Bucking the Sarge*, I have taken time off.

When will Bucking the Sarge be published?

It will come out in fall 2004.

What do you like to do when you're not writing?

It depends on where I am in the book. Toward the end of a book I'm pretty focused on it, but at other times, I love to play basketball. I love listening to music and traveling.

Do you ever get blocked? For example, do you ever have trouble thinking of what might come next in the book you're currently writing, or what your next book will be about?

I never do, and if I did I would never admit it to myself. I think once you tell yourself you're blocked, then you've got problems. And I think being blocked means that there's a flaw in something you've written, and it just doesn't flow naturally. What you have to do is give yourself some time, move away from it for a while, and your mind will work on it when you're not even thinking about it. The solution will come to you. You go back into the story, find out where it went wrong, and go at it from there. If I'm having trouble with one story, I always have another project going, so I can jump over to that. And that way I don't stop writing. The most important thing is not to stop. You just have to keep going and you'll work things out.

You originally had planned to have the Watsons drive to Florida instead of Alabama, but changed your mind after your son came

home with Dudley Randall's poem "Ballad of Birmingham," about the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Were there any other surprises that came up as you wrote the manuscript?

The way I write everything is a surprise. I don't outline. I don't know where the story is going to go. Everything that goes on is kind of a revelation to me, which is one of the fun parts. I know I've really got the story when the narrator comes to me as soon as I sit down and he tells me what's going to happen next.

What was the most difficult part of the book to write?

Starting a book is always the hardest. Being the kind of author who doesn't outline, if I start to write a book, I don't know where those words will end up in the story—the beginning, middle, or end. I just know I have to get it down and get the story flowing.

With which character do you have the most in common?

I think that both Byron and Kenny have certain traits that are from me. I'm the older brother in my family, and my younger brother would swear that Byron is an accurate picture of me.

What are you working on now?

I'm in the early stages of a new project—it's not exactly a sequel to *Bud, Not Buddy*, but it's got some of the same characters. I'm trying to do a story from a girl's point of view.